



## François Truffaut: The Anarchist Imagination

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JUDITH SHATNOFF

## François Truffaut— The Anarchist Imagination

The problem is: a phenomenal young talent which gives no quarter and demands the ultimate in tolerance.

One can either submit with a helpless bow, or retreat to the more comfortable artistry of a fashionable crew—the Fellinis, Viscontis, Bergmans, Resnais—or rush even farther backward to the primitive security of Hollywood cinema chiefs who show a chair as a chair as a chair.

For the braver critics there is François Truffaut, who has come to the screen in a whirlwind of amoral energy. Whether we like what he does or not, he can't be ignored. He's a dangerous talent.

To begin with, he's dangerous because of his sense of form, which is highly personal, subject to quirks and shifts. And he's dangerous because his use of time upsets what we've come to expect from recent film art: either a delicate rendering of fractured moments (Kurasawa, Resnais), or a brutal recreation of a minute as a minute (Antonioni). And Truffaut is dangerous because he specializes in weird combinations: tragedy plus comedy plus melodrama plus slapstick; and because he's able to balance these combinations so tastefully they "work." But mostly, he is dangerous because he continually thinks.

He thinks on a visual level:

Odd camera angles, high-key exposures, grain, interspersed stop-and-go motion, sequences which suddenly zoom into a bird's eye view, multiple-scene frames, cut-outs, squares of action surrounded by black—Truffaut uses whatever technique suits his purpose, or his whim. He will shorten or lengthen scenes for an effect, for a change of pace, for a joke, for their beauty. Consider, for instance, the race in the

early part of *Jules and Jim*. It was run to show that Catherine will break any rules to win, but it was photographed in blurs and close-ups which are rhythmical studies of motion, reminiscent of Kurasawa's treatment of horseback riders in *Throne of Blood*. In *Shoot the Piano Player*, overlapped stopped views of lovers asleep in bed are used to show passage of time; but they also create a high-key montage of bodies, scattered clothing, and objects, which is abstractly beautiful. The scenes of the boy in *The 400 Blows* spinning in an amusement park centrifuge are mainly included for visual dazzle. But above all—whether initiated by whim or reason—the camera technique and the audacious editing (especially in the opening ten minutes of *Jules and Jim*) are the work of an artist who knows exactly what he is doing and does not for a moment give up or lose control.

Some devotees would say the same for *Last Year at Marienbad*; but *Marienbad* is all visual icing, as elegant and as blatantly mannered as the plaster curlicues in the tiny summer-house of Nymphenberg Palace which Resnais photographed up, down and sideways in his opening sequence. In tone, *Marienbad* is equivalent to a fugue based on "Three Blind Mice," and its content is no more worth unraveling than a puns and anagrams crossword-puzzle. François Truffaut, in his three major films, gives us as much visual dash and splendor as we can possibly admire, but in addition his cinematic virtuosity expresses a complex and dangerous point of view. He is the equal of Michaelangelo Antonioni—with one important difference. Antonioni bravely leads us through despair to the blank wall of meaninglessness only to stop

short before the rear exit — the exciting circuit to pleasure, absurd joy — supplied by the best existential thinkers, everyone from Albert Camus to Paul Tillich. Truffaut doesn't stop short. He's an ex-j.d., a slum kid with a slum kid's energy and ability to thumb his nose and laugh and suffer simultaneously. He's also a French intellectual — a special breed nurtured over centuries to despise sentimentality. All these qualities are present in his three feature-length films, and they supply the dramatic tension of high art.

It's at first hard to understand *The 400 Blows* in relation to Truffaut's later work, for in some ways it isn't a French film at all, but an excellent version of the American "art" movie. What is remarkable about these movies is their lack of philosophical base. They spring, instead, from an adolescent verve (*Shadows*, *Senseless* or any "experimental" film you can name), and rapidly fizz out; or they lean heavily on The Problem motif in amateur sociology (*The Defiant Ones*, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *The Connection*, etc.); or they sell a version of Freud which even the vulgar can applaud (see, for example, the ecstatic reviews in *Time* of *David and Lisa*, a psychiatric soap-opera which drags and lisp out the "truths" of *The Snake Pit* (1946) and *Spellbound* (1945) as if they were tomorrow's revelations).

*The 400 Blows* has many memorable scenes, including some which allude to Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite*. The boy and his stepfather happily cooking together in their miserable

little kitchen, an inane interview with an off-screen psychologist, the boy enjoying a rare outing with his mother and stepfather, the running views of Paris through the grille of a police wagon, are fine. But now and then, despite the autobiographical "necessity" which gives *The 400 Blows* its force, it's preachy. It levels an accusing finger at "you out there" — society — following the best of Stanley Kramer gestures.

True, French law is brutal and perverse: a man is guilty until he proves himself innocent; a man can be held incomunicado for days in one of those clever chicken-cages, shown in the film, in which young, old, murderers, maniacs, pickpockets, traffic violators, are thrown together indiscriminately. James Baldwin, in an essay, described how he was caught in Paris with a stolen bedsheet in his possession (innocently so), and subjected to the medieval niceties of the French criminal code. Baldwin, an adult American, finally got help from outside. Truffaut himself was rescued from a prison sentence by the famous critic André Bazin, whose protégé he became. But no such luck for the boy-hero of *The 400 Blows*. He is a straw tossed by twin hurricanes: his family and society. His crime is trivial; his capture is ironic. The treatment he receives is heartless and unreasonable. It suggests that a society which has always prided itself on its rational base, is really inhuman; that to fear this society is not paranoiac, but logical and necessary. And when the boy escapes from a reformatory and runs for the ocean, merely to see it for the first time, his action is far more respectable than the rigid social structure which has battered him about. It is here, at the end of the film, when the boy stands in the surf, that Truffaut makes the comment which goes beyond any of those sociological clichés we are too often asked to swallow as important messages.

Here Truffaut's "thinking" shows. For we have identified with the underdog as incident upon incident piles against him; we can't help but cheer his run for freedom. And suddenly, we are stopped; the boy stops, sociology stops, the film stops. What now? Where next? The

THE 400 BLOWS: Jean-Pierre Léaud.



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poor dreamer has run to and *through* his dream. Mistreatment and misunderstanding fuse as we are asked to consider something shocking: If the reality of our dreams is as futile as the reality of experience, what is left? Where can one run? The question remains as motion stops and a grainy image of the boy as a clipped newspaper photo, dehumanized, hangs on the screen.

It is from this ironic position, this inquiry into absurdity, that *Shoot the Piano Player* begins; and fiercely, wildly, it pushes beyond any adolescent or Beat glee in the destruction of form and symbol to a resolution which is as effective as a blow on the head. It's a fascinating accomplishment. It works through an exploitation of incongruity, and we, the audience, are its happy victims.

The opening sequence of *Shoot the Piano Player* is characteristic. A man runs desperately through the foggy dark streets of Paris. We can see the strain on his face and hear the panting of his breath above the urgent clatter of his heels, and from long experience we know what all that means. Then he collides, comically, with a lamppost. He moans, he groans, he rubs his head, and a hand reaches for him. He's caught! Yes? No. He's helped to his feet by a complacent passer-by, and the two walk on casually, joking, and discussing the pros and cons of marriage. This chit-chat is allowed to continue long enough to assuage any sensation of desperation or danger which may have been left over from the opening scene, and, as soon as this is gauged to have been accomplished, our man runs off even more desperately in another direction. He is still being chased; his life is still in danger; and we sit gaping in surprise.

Our next view of him is when he enters a cabaret, greets his brother "Charlie" Saroyan, the piano player, and talks vaguely of his troubles. When Charlie refuses help, the desperate runner simply begins to enjoy himself dancing with the local whores. Once again we are surprised. Surely no man in danger would



"... what is left?" (*400 Blows*).

dance with such abandon at such a time. We are further misled by a scene which raises *Shoot the Piano Player* to high comedy. A waiter gets up onto the bandstand to sing. He is shot head-on, from a fixed camera position, as he sways and bounces up and down, deadpan, singing verse after verse of what must be the wittiest song yet heard in films: the blight on the berry (a euphemism for an unlucky lady). While we are still laughing, the pursuing gangsters catch up with our "desperate" man. And it is no joke. They carry loaded revolvers. Once more a desperate chase begins and we wonder: where are we? in comedy? In the shock of ironic juxtapositions?

This is clearly indicated in the long flashback which tells the history of the piano player. Only in this sequence does Truffaut use a standard, chronological presentation which leaves us in no doubt which attitude to adopt. It's a tragic story with cynical overtones: a talented pianist gets his first concert opportunity because his wife sleeps with an impresario. In itself this is nothing unusual; we're all cynically aware that a roll in the hay has been the start of many brilliant careers. But it proves tragic for the pianist and his wife, for she commits suicide during the moment he flees from her.

In one moment, through one act, everything which took years — a lifetime — to accomplish becomes meaningless; perhaps it always was meaningless. The pianist turns his back on suc-



SHOOT  
THE  
PIANO  
PLAYER

cess, on ambition, on effort, on feeling. He can't exorcise his love of music, but he can refuse to do anything more than just play the piano. In a world which can suddenly become meaningless, why should anything be done with or about anything? Thus, Charlie barely responds to his new girl's ambitious proposal to reinstate him as a serious artist. He smiles vaguely and lets her do as she likes. Unfortunately, she is vulgar and gets him into trouble. Later, oddly, she is killed. Why? Well, why does anything happen? Because it does. If there is any unifying tone in the film it is an existential irrelevance, coupled with a shrug from Charles Aznavour, a masterful actor, which asks, What did you expect? Existence is a succession of dirty jokes: nothing lasts, struggle is futile, hope is obscene. (The title *Shoot the Piano Player* refers to a barroom sign in old Westerns — "Don't Shoot the Piano Player" — but Truffaut's film might as easily be called *Why Not Shoot the Piano Player?*)

Ironic juxtapositions are used on another, equally deadly, level through the gangsters who kidnap Charlie and his girl. Never did two gangsters behave more like businessmen suffering from indigestion. All the ominous old gangster conventions from Al Capone to *Rififi* have been blithely avoided for the gangster unconventionalities of farce, such as the ones which open the hilarious movie, *Some Like It Hot*. At one point, after one gangster swears he is

telling the truth or may his mother drop dead, there is a flash shot of a skinny old woman kicking up her heels and dropping dead. The slapstick is a little forced, but funny. Then our hero and heroine make a nonchalant escape. Yes, this is farce; we feel assured. Thus, towards the end, when these same lovable gangsters behave ruthlessly, when real bullets scatter and someone is actually, senselessly killed, we are as shocked as if a gentle neighbor suddenly ran berserk with an ax.

What has occurred throughout *Shoot the Piano Player* is the deliberate explosion of each cliché in turn, or, to be more precise, a deliberate destruction of the expected order of events. A series of clues which usually lead in one direction are abruptly, deliberately, interrupted and rushed in another direction. On-track, off-track, on a new track, off that, we in the audience are shunted around until we give up and docilely obey Truffaut, the ringmaster. Our judgment has proven wrong so many times, at last we sit with judgment suspended, forced outside logic into a hodgepodge of pain and pleasure. A mock fight between the piano player and his boss can turn deadly serious. A young girl can be killed by a stray bullet and her headlong slide down a snowy slope can be breathtakingly beautiful. A good man can produce evil as easily as an evil man. In fact, there is no such thing as good or evil; there are only complex mixtures

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of both, and there is circumstance. There is also a muddled reference to fate or blood curse in the talk among Charlie and his brothers; but the real explanation is that there is no explanation. Life is unpredictable and inexplicable. It simply happens. There are lulls in the process of destruction, some fun, some love, some success; but finally, we are left with a tinkling, mocking little tune. Truffaut has managed to do what Henry Miller always tries\* to do: disrupt, disorientate, kiss You, spit in Your eye.

*Jules and Jim* does the same in a more sophisticated style. Here, Truffaut isn't as autocratic in his method of control, but wins his way through charm, wheedling and coaxing the viewer to give up his standard of judgment — especially his moral standard — and his usual pattern of perception and interpretation.

At first this is accomplished by a quick series of whimsical, charming views of the exploits of Jules and Jim, Mutt and Jeff, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote (as they prefer to call themselves, thereby ennobling their comic aspects), a gangly, effervescent pair of innocent libertines looking for someone to worship — Dulcinea, perhaps? They find her, first as a statue, then in the flesh: Catherine, who, if we are to trust those dear boys, Jules and Jim, is the quintessence of female charm.

Charm is the key to the film. In *Une Histoire d'Eau*, a short Truffaut made with Jean-Luc Godard in 1958, the touch of irreverent charm was already apparent. An ultra-Gallic pair enjoy the flooding of a river: they race a car along a flooded road, spraying the drowned countryside with their gay wash; they jitterbug on the one square of dry land left; they picnic and make impossibly French faces at each other. Death, inconvenience, millions of dol-

\*Perhaps Truffaut succeeds because a film can control both the visual and auditory perceptions of its audience, whereas a novel can only approximate a visual world through imagery, and must, therefore, rely on its energy to construct its "closed universe." Perhaps in this sense the film is more dangerous and potentially greater than the novel as an art form.)



" . . . gangster unconventions of farce . . . "

lars of damage, may have resulted from this flood, but we are never told about it; it's simply an occasion for charming fun. It also shows Truffaut's rare joyous quality — one that is much less fashionable and much more difficult to express than Swedish gloom or Italian emptiness.

*Jules and Jim* is a literate film. It is based on a novel (as is *Shoot the Piano Player*) and there are references to literature throughout, such as the continual mention of Cervantes' pair of heroes. Jules and Jim, both writers, are part of a bohemian circle of artists, and a newsclip of Nazi book-burning implies the barbarism which ended that post-World War I intellectual and artistic period in Europe. There is even a famous literary precedent for their maison à trois, Voltaire's fifteen-year affair with Mme. du Châtelet — although Voltaire and the Marquis du Châtelet were not as close friends originally as Jules and Jim.

Visually, the film echoes Jean Renoir, and no film since *A Day in the Country* has been as charming as *Jules and Jim*. It is delicately lighted; its historical atmosphere is effortlessly correct. There is only beauty in the landscapes, the architecture, the faces, the gestures, the period costumes — and for a reason: the visual loveliness contributes to the idyllic misrepresentation. It's a deft seduction. It prepares us to accept whatever unorthodoxy appears on

screen, until any bluster of "Thou shalt not . . ." as a reaction to Catherine's behavior becomes irrelevant. Once again judgment is suspended — not through shock as in *Shoot the Piano Player* — but pleasantly. We are won to acceptance through beauty and spontaneity, and there we are for a while, poignantly wondering at ourselves recreated as we never were.

For Jules, Jim, and Catherine are children, just the sort of children we would have grown up to be if the nasty real world hadn't interfered. Jules and Jim are the sweet children and Catherine is the bad child, the mischievous demigod who makes life fascinating but exacts payment in absolute loyalty. The nasty real world finally intrudes in the form of rough newsclips of World War I, but it does little to mature our boys. It makes them a little sadder than before, and it makes them need someone to worship even more.

True, they are beginning to despair of human love. Jules remarks that someday he will write a love story and all the characters will be insects. But they are firm in their adoration of Catherine — almost as firm as she is in demanding it.

The price is high but so are the rewards, for Jeanne Moreau's portrayal of Catherine is brilliantly charming. She is charming when

she makes funny faces, cuddles in bed, sings songs, rides a bicycle, skips stones, and especially charming when she plays tag. "Catch me," she says, tapping Jim on the shoulder and galloping off; she is thirty-two and looks older — a genius stroke of casting, for a baby-faced Catherine would be banal. She invents a charming game called The Village Idiot to amuse her adorers. Oscar Werner, Henri Serre, Jeanne Moreau, and a Jane Withers midget-type of child (an awful choice, whether deliberate or accidental) sit gibbering and twisting their faces at each other as the picture spins and reels round and round like a child spinning and reeling with delight. It's a pure recreation of youthful joy. We can identify wholeheartedly with our carefree friends, who hardly ever remember they are adults with the weary weight of adult responsibility ready to fall on them at any moment. Truffaut doesn't moralize, and why should we? We are enjoying an emotion which hasn't been as splendidly recreated on the screen since the swinging, giggling expression of young love in *Miracle in Milan*. To judge our friends in any way is to impose external standards on their "world."

Similarly, to interpret Catherine's jump into the Seine as her "act of freedom" goes beyond



JULES AND  
JIM: "the  
sweet children . . ."

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the limits of the film, for the jump is only free as an act of childish derring-do is free. It fits with the behavior of the two children in the British thriller *The Yellow Balloon* who tragically dare each other to jump the chasms between bomb ruins. It's no "proof" that women are more equal than men, at least more courageous about jumping into rivers, and wasn't meant to be. Truffaut would never be so provincial as to show Catherine hooting and tooting feminist propaganda. He simply shows her: here she is. Here is her gang.

What the jump does prove is that Jules and Jim are nannies, that Catherine knows it, and that she has chosen them precisely for their perfectly charming ninny-ness.

As the boys walk along the banks of the Seine they blabber nonsense about the inferiority of women. When Jules reaches the final silliness — a woman would never be allowed in the presence of God — Catherine orders Jim to protest. "I protest," he says weakly, after a moment, and she jumps, because her subject's performance hasn't been good enough. Stop that blabbering and look at me, her jump orders; I am I and I am better than you and don't you forget it! Her jump is an act of arrogance and egotism. It's an act of passion, and for that reason, despite everything which follows, Catherine is great. We must honor her intensity as the essence of greatness; she adds magic to a story of two sweet nannies.

But Catherine's is a vastly limited force and shouldn't be mistaken for freedom. Her passions are great, but she is their victim. They control her. She isn't free. And anyway, *Jules and Jim* isn't about freedom; it's about fantasy. It is fantasy.

More pertinent than the jump to understanding the film, is the story Jim tells Jules and Albert about the French soldier who wrote letters to a casual lady friend every night in the trenches. At first these letters were formal, then they became more and more loving, then passionate, until an engagement was proposed and marriage arranged. But two days before the Armistice, before passion by correspond-



Catherine and her two nannies (*JULES AND JIM*).

ence could be consummated, the soldier was killed. As Jim explains it, such an extraordinary affair could never have developed without the stimulating danger of death in war. His friends agree and sit silently gazing at the magnificent scenery. They can all appreciate how lucky a man is to have his fantasy forever protected as fantasy. Death has preserved what life would inevitably destroy. It's sad, but they savor the paradox, sigh, and rush off after their common dangerous fantasy: Catherine.

The parallels are obvious. The story Jim tells is the example which precedes the example of a major fantasy acted out to its conclusion. And, in terms of an adult world, the child's conclusion must be destructive.

Thus, Catherine kills herself and Jim. As she drives off the bridge she smiles twice, most charmingly. We watch the car plunge into the river and see bubbles rise to the surface. But it is unbelievable for it is all so charming; the view is so pretty. Therefore, we are shown the cremation of the bodies in rather factual, if uneasy, detail, and the entombment of the ashes. Now we believe. Now we understand Jules's feeling of relief. The great fantasy will be preserved by death, but in life it is done — or is it? What is that charming music which accompanies Jules as he walks stiff-leggedly through the cemetery? We wonder as we realize that Truffaut has succeeded again — this time much more subtly — in being outrageous. Once again he has played, we have danced, and we are left to wipe our



*Henri Serre, Jeanne Moreau, Oskar Werner.*

kissed and insulted eyes. But we are no longer in a schoolboy-shocker nihilistic mode. We have, instead, approached the anarchical position of the rebel in Camus' terms. We have experienced "an unrepentant work of art."

Many of us have lost sympathy en route. Many may feel that Truffaut's evocation of charm and suspension of judgment hasn't been total enough to make them accept the cruelty which builds and dominates the end of the film — the indiscriminate bed-hopping, betrayal, suicide, murder. It's difficult to be appreciative unless we remember we are not dealing here with life seen through a camera keyhole, but with art. To quote Camus (*The Rebel*):

"Here we have an imaginary world . . . which is created by the rectification of the actual world — a world where suffering can, if it wishes, continue until death, where passions are never distracted, where people are prey to obsessions and are always present to one another. Man is finally able to give himself the alleviating form and limits which he pursues in vain in his own life. . . . Far from being moral or purely formal, this alteration aims,

primarily, at unity and thereby expresses a metaphysical need. . . . On this level [a work of art] is primarily an exercise of intelligence in the service of nostalgic or rebellious sensibilities."

Needless to say, this position is the antithesis of Realism.

Well, we are used to nonrealistic films. We are sophisticated about abstract, surrealist, Dada, Beat films. We are even more sophisticated about the unrealistic commercial movies made in Hollywood about the glamorous life of the working girl, the doctor, the white hunter, the ad-man, the gunman, the salesman, anybody. We have Stan Brakhage, Walt Disney, *Naked Lunch*, self-destroying machines, and we are comfortable without realism. But we are not comfortable with Truffaut, simply because he refuses to allow it. As soon as we settle down with one metaphor he jars us out and into another, perhaps one which is contradictory. As soon as we pin him down aesthetically, he shrugs us off. Before we can get soulful about the philosophic implications on screen, he makes us laugh. He literally "assaults the sensibilities" in any way he can,

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using any handy means. Thus, Truffaut, to whom the labels "realism" or "nonrealism" are most likely meaningless, nonetheless deftly and deliberately uses materials of both:

Characters are recognizable, some even empathic, but they develop so complexly shaded, good and bad, strong and weak, that our impression of them, and therefore our identification with them, must be continually revised. Michel, the "hero" of *Breathless* (based on a Truffaut story suggestion) is a prime example of this appealing-repelling mixture; Catherine is another. Settings are accurate to the last detail, but occasionally, deliberately, they are photographed in a way which shatters and rearranges their appearance. Scenes move in climatic order, but in logical disorder, erratically, as life moves; and there is no reason why some episodes follow rather than precede others. Stories hint of important ideas, but there are no "messages" of any kind, anywhere, to clutch and carry off. Most uncomfortable of all, Truffaut doesn't indicate that his realism is or isn't real. He doesn't use any of the paraphernalia of Cocteau, for example, to announce: Attention, this is Art you're watching — Art, not life. And so as an audience we are in the grip of a double irony. There is no safety.

Truffaut does as he pleases. He has an uncanny ability to sense the moment at which to jar us, and enough artistic courage to act swiftly, even violently, to take advantage of that moment. His attitude is iconoclastic — nothing is sacred. It is anarchistic because it is entirely personal, yet tightly controlled; his intellectual vision controls an emotional context for a creative — *not* a destructive or nihilistic — purpose. Truffaut seems to be an anarchist even in relation to his own creations, for he recognizes no structure beyond the one required for each individual work of art, and this, too, is made to be remade. All positions are established to be transcended. All that is constant is the creator himself, saying *Sic volo, sic jubeo*—This is will, this I command. And that, necessarily, is the final statement of great art.



"... the cruelty which builds and dominates the end of the film . . ."

## THE FILMS OF FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT

### Shorts

1954: *Une Visite*.

1957: *Les Mistons* (The Mischief-Makers). Screenplay by Truffaut, based on a story, "Virginales," by Maurice Pons. Photography: Jean Malige. Score: Maurice le Roux. With Gerard Blain and Bernadette Lafont.

1958: *Une Histoire d'Eau*. Made in collaboration with Jean-Luc Godard.

1962: *Antoine et Collette*. Truffaut's part of the multiple-director film, *Love at Age Twenty*.

### Features

1959: *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (The 400 Blows). Produced and directed by Truffaut. Scenario: Truffaut and Marcel Moussy. Photography: Henri Decae. Editing: Yoyotte, Decugis, DePossel. Score: Jean Constantin. Les Films de Carosse—SEDIF. With Jean-Pierre Léaud.

1959: *Tirez sur le Pianiste* (Shoot the Piano Player). Scenario: Truffaut and Marcel Moussy from the novel *Down There*, by David Goodis. Photography: Raoul Coutard. Decor: Jacques Mely. Score: Jean Constantin. Films de la Pleiade. With Charles Aznavour, Albert Remy, Nicole Berger.

1961: *Jules et Jim* (Jules and Jim). Based on the novel by H. P. Roche. Adaptation and dialogue: Truffaut and Jean Gruault. Photography: Raoul Coutard. Score: Georges Delerue. Les Films du Carosse—SEDIF. With Jeanne Moreau, Oskar Werner, Henri Serre.

(One can only wonder what Truffaut is doing with *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's devastating futuristic novel about life under totalitarian science. *Fahrenheit 451* is the temperature at which books burn.)